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ABSTRACT

By analogy, research suggests that training Child Development Associate (CDA) candidates to handle the complexity and autonomy of the early childhood teaching job is likely to have long range effects on the teacher and the early childhood education field. That is, a truly competent teacher behaves professionally and will become increasingly professional. Important indicators of competence and "professionalism" (such as self-directedness, playfulness, knowledge, flexibility, adaptability, social and communication skills, self-confidence, and a positive sense of self) are demonstrable within the CDA credentialing system, although the system focuses on lower level specific indicators. However, while CDA behavioral competencies, as observed in the classroom and documented in the CDA portfolio, have content validity, their concurrent and predictive validity is less clear. Few studies have related the CDA competencies to differences in the performance of CDA and non-CDA trained teachers. Even fewer studies have related the specific CDA functional areas to child outcomes. Findings of a study conducted by Ruopp and others identified four general competency factors based on the original 13 CDA functional areas; these four factors were significantly related to children's test score gains. The study therefore supports the thesis that a more general level and configuration of factors are more important to competency assessment and professionalism than are are the 6 competencies, the 13 functional areas, or their even more specific indicators. (RH)

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Using Performance/Competence Measures to Determine Readiness for Professional Entry in the Field[1]

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The importance of the teacher in affecting children's learning cannot be overstated. The centrality of the teacher to the establishment of the learning environment in early childhood settings has been stated in many ways in many places (cf. Allen, 1981; Almy, 1975; Peters & Kostelnik, 1981; Spodek, Saracho, & Lee, 1984). Spodek et al. (1984) state, for example, "Of all the factors that contribute to the social environment in which children are educated the teacher is by far the most critical" (p. 135).

But what is it about the teacher that is most critical? What criteria shall be used to determine entry in the field? Indeed, what distinguishes a professional from something less?[2] The literature suggests attention be directed to both teacher behavior and teacher traits.

Teacher Behavior

Clearly, the CDA competencies represent, in part, what a broad array of experts, educators, and practitioners deem to be important behaviors. That is, the CDA behavioral competencies as observed in the classroom and documented in the portfolio, by the nature of the way they were formulated, have content validity. Less clear is their criterion validity--particularly concurrent

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and predictive validity. Follow-up studies have generally used self-report measures as criteria (e.g., Granger, Lombardi, & Gleason, 1983; Peters & Sutton, in press). Few studies have related the CDA competencies to differences between CDA and non-CDA trained teachers in the classroom. Even fewer studies have related the specific CDA functional areas to child outcomes One study of policy relevant variables in day care services (Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, & Coelen, 1979) incidentally used a 235-item observation instrument based upon the original 13 CDA functional areas. Ruopp et al. factor analyzed the observation results and found the check sheet yielded a global competency score and four subscores (Resources, Environment, Classroom Management, and Child Orientation) that were found to significantly relate to child test score gains. This research suggests that it is not necessarily the 6 competencies, the 13 functional areas, or their even more specific indicators that are important. Rather, a more general level and configuration of competencies seems critical. Unfortunately, this study did not include a set of "anchor" variables that would have helped us define factors that emerged.Whether this more general competence can be taught has only been assessed indirectly.

Teacher Traits

Though the designers of the CDA program had no intention of equating the CDA credential with an academic degree, they did intend that the successful CDA would be the competent classroom equivalent (in the 13 functional areas) of early childhood teachers trained and certified through more traditional means--

hence, the extensive effort to gain acceptance and recognition within state licensure and certification systems. The question remains whether such "equivalence" is assumed to exist only at the behavioral level within the classroom or whether it extends to a wider array of personal and professional characteristics (which also may be assessed through observable behaviors). The literature in early childhood education, including Head Start and CDA, suggests the broader interpretation. Some recent research findings suggest this broader interpretation may be justified (Peters & Sutton, in press).

Beller (1973) also points out that the research gives continuous support to the notion that an evaluation of teacher functioning must include not only the techniques the teacher employs but also her or his personality and the teaching situation in which she or he functions.

Personal characteristics. A number of authors have presented lists of desirable or essential personal characteristics for teachers of young children. Some of these are based upon empirical research, some on experience and common sense. Some of the most common characteristics have been compiled by Almy (1975). These include: a high energy level, patience, warmth, nurturance, openness to new ideas, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility in thinking, and maturity. Others would add a positive self-concept (Combs, 1965; Spodek et al., 1984), positive attitudes and expectations toward children's achievement, an understanding of child development, and the

ability to translate that knowledge into a consistent pattern of behavior.

These characteristics make a great deal of sense when one considers the setting in which the early childhood educator functions and the roles he or she must assume.

Setting characteristics. Early childhood education settings have traditionally operated rather autonomously. When dealing with preschool-age or younger children, they have been generally outside the mainstream of public education and have fought to remain so (Caldwell, 1981). Both state and federal governments have refrained from trying to regulate program content or curricula (FIDCR Appropriateness Report, 1978; Hollick, Peters, & Kirchner, 1972). Curricula based upon a range of development theories and educational philosophies exist as do many eclectic versions. The decision of their selection or rejection usually is left up to individual teachers, education coordinators, or program directors. Witnin most programs, the staff design and implement their own ideas. Indeed, federal programs have encouraged or mandated local options and choices and have stressed individualization (e.g., Head Start planned variation, Follow-Through, HCEEP).

Further, since most programs are relatively small and have no formal links to other similar programs, most overall planning and all individual daily planning are carried out at the classroom level. Thus, diversity is the hallmark of the early childhood field.

The program autonomy present in the early childhood field gives the classroom teacher a range of latitude and freedom that greatly exceeds that experienced by most public school teachers. By the same token, this implies that early childhood personnel be able to plan and carry out their program, select their teaching methods, organize materials and their environment to meet the needs of the children in their charge, and do so in a consistent, positive, and effective manner. That is, the teacher must be able to operate in a planful, flexible, independent manner based upon a firm and grounded set of beliefs about child learning and development.

Two additional characteristics of the early childhood teacher's functional environment are also worth noting. First, there is the mix of the children served. Development variability amongst children is great, even within a fairly narrow age span, during the early childhood years. P.L. 94-142 and the mandated inclusion of handicapped children within Head Start programs has further increased the heterogeneity within most classrooms. Yet, the goals and curricula in early childhood have traditionally NOT been limited to "academic subject matter" areas. Early childhood personnel have historically taken responsibility for the development of the "whole" child (and in many cases the whole family)--a formidable responsibility, given the heterogeneity of the clientele.

Secondly, early childhood teachers work more directly with adults than do most teachers of older children. Most center-based early childhood programs have more than one adult per

classroom, and the role of teacher usually includes responsibility for training and supervision. Additionally, early childhood educators work more directly with parents than do teachers at other levels of education. The interpersonal relationships among staff and parents and children can often become quite complex (Peters & Benn, 1980; Powell, 1977), but the data are clear that they are important (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Lazar, Darlington, Murray, & Snipper, 1982).

The complexity of the social environment in which the early childhood educator works clearly demands flexibility, openness, social and communication skills, and a great deal of personal strength.

The relation of the suggested desirable teacher traits or characteristics to the behavioral competency of teachers in the classroom has received some support in the early childhood research. However, the relation to the specific CDA competencies has not been established. Further, since much of the literature reports correlational data, we cannot be sure whether teachers who have these traits are more competent or whether people who are taught to be competent in the classroom develop these traits. Does CDA training that modifies and improves classroom competency also affect changes in teacher personality and characteristics? These are important questions if we are to rely on classroom observed performance and competency measures to determine entry into "professional" status.

Theory

There is a body of literature that provides a basis for understanding and predicting the answers to the questions raised.

Kohn and his associates (Kohn, 1969; Kohn & Schooler, 1978) investigated the relationships between social class, work conditions and values, orientations, and behaviors. In essence, they found that men whose jobs facilitated self-direction consistently endorsed the value of self-direction for themselves and their children. Self-direction, for Kohn, involved thinking for oneself, "acting on the basis of one's own judgment . . . being open minded, being trustful of others, holding responsible moral standards" (Kohn, 1969, p. 189). Men who endorsed self-direction were also found to be more open to change, intellectually flexible, and engaged in intellectually demanding leisure time activities (Kohn, 1969). Similar relationships have been found for women employed outside the home (Miller et al., 1979). In contrast, men whose jobs stressed conformity and routine activity endorsed the notion that conformity to external authority was the best course of action for themselves and their children. Conformity in this context involved following the dictates of authority, focusing on the external consequences of one's action, being intolerant of nonconformity and dissent, being distrustful of others, and having moral standards which strongly emphasize obedience to the letter of the law (Kohn, 1969, p. 189).

Kohn's conclusions were based upon three related national studies that involved initially interviewing a representative

national sample of all men employed in civilian occupations (N = 3,101) and subsequently (10 years later) reinterviewing 833 of them and 269 of their wives. In brief summary form, the longitudinal data indicate that:

1. Current job demands affect current thinking processes.

2. Current thinking processes have a sizeable effect on the future course of one's career (Kohn & Schooler, 1978, p. 43).

Again, Miller et al. (1979) found similar results for women.

If we were to use Kohn's findings as an indication of the answers we might expect to the questions we have raised above, they would suggest that persons who could handle competently the complexity and autonomy of the early childhood teaching job would become increasingly flexible in their thinking and would value independence in themselves and in the children in their charge. Further, these changes in their thinking and valuing would have an effect on their subsequent career in that they would be predicted to seek out increasingly more complex and autonomous work. By analogy to the CDA training situation, and given that the early childhood work environment is a complex one, training one to be competent in that environment is likely to have long-range effects on psychological functioning, beliefs about what is desirable in children, and on educational and career aspirations. That is, the competent teacher, in the sense the terms are used here, IS BEHAVING professionally and will become increasingly professional. These are, as well, the ones who will work toward professionalization of the field.

Other literature would suggest that when a teacher values and expects independence and performance from children he or she is more likely to get it.

Assessment of Competence

Assessment of competence within the classroom situation remains the most reasonable choice for determining entry into the field and for labeling the individual "professional." The basic concept behind the CDA credentialing system, and for that matter any competency- or performance-based system, is viable theoretically IF and only if the level of competency--the configuration of behaviors one observes--is the correct one. The indicators to be sought are those that demonstrate self-directedness, planfulness, knowledge, flexibility, adaptability, social and communication skills, self-confidence, and a positive sense of self. These are not unlike Ruopp et al.'s (1979) general level of competence (the C factor?), and they are demonstrable within the CDA credentialing system.

The CDA system is geared more for looking at lower level specific indicators. Currently, our only assurance that those indicators observed cumulatively will build to the desired higher level of competence in the individual case lies in the selection of the Local Assessment Team (LAT). The LAT must, during the assessment, do the abstracting, integration, and "factor" analysis required to make judgments concerning general competence. This is a difficult task, but it is more likely than anything else we have available for discerning and recognizing competent and professional teachers in the classroom.

Notes

1. Paper presented as part of a session entitled "Developing a Model for a Modal Early Childhood Practitioner: Professional, Semi-Professional." Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Los Angeles, California, November 8, 1984.

2. In this paper, a distinction is made between the use of the term professional to represent a person who holds membership in an occupation that is recognized as professional and the use of the term professional to describe the characteristics of the behavior of an individual. This paper focuses on the latter. Acting professionally means acting autonomously, rationally, and ethically in the exercise of one's knowledge and skills.

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